

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, December 2, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“ABOUNDING IN HOPE”

Romans 15:13

I once read about a church named “The Church of Advent Hope.” That’s a wonderful name for a church. “The Church of Advent Hope.” For Advent and hope go together. Now Advent means the coming of Christ. And one of the greatest gifts which Christ’s coming brings to the world and to human hearts is hope. So the first candle we light in Advent is the candle of hope. And we pray in Paul’s words, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and hope in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

We humans need hope. If we can’t look ahead to a future that holds the promise of good, then our existence becomes meaningless.

A few years ago I read a book by the Christian novelist P.D. James entitled “The Children of Men.” The novel is set in England. The year is 2027 and for some unknown reason there is world-wide infertility. No children have been born for 18 years. The population is aging and dwindling. Schools and playgrounds have been shut down. No one cares about much of anything other than their own comfort. Democracy has crumbled and a dictator takes power. Despair settles in like a thick November fog. The cities are dirty and crime-ridden and even the countryside seems dreary. There are huge refugee and immigration problems. Last year the book became a movie last year and it’s a case where the book is much better than the movie. In fact, I can’t recommend the movie, though I do recommend the novel, “The Children of Men,” by P. D. James. It is an insightful commentary on some trends in today’s world.

The apostle Paul knew our need for hope and he speaks often of our Christian hope. In Romans 15 Paul is instructing Jewish and Gentile converts how to live together in harmony, welcoming one another as Christ welcomed them, bearing with each other’s failings, pleasing their neighbour ahead of pleasing themselves, building one another up. Paul quotes Isaiah to show that God gave Christ for both Jews and Gentiles, for all. Paul then ends with a prayer for the church. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and hope in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Romans 15:13) And that is my prayer for us all - that during these Advent days we may be filled with abundant hope which overflows into all our days and into the world. But something has to happen for the Holy Spirit to stir up this hope within us. And that is the preaching of Christ’s coming among us.

So we proclaim the coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope.

First, we proclaim the past coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope.

Verse 12 ‘And Isaiah said, “The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope.”’ Isaiah was looking ahead to the first coming of Christ. There is even a hint here of Christ’s resurrection. “He who rises to rule the Gentiles.” Now this was all in the future from Isaiah’s perspective, and probably not fully understood by Him. But for us it is a firm historical event. The root of Jesse, Jesus Christ, has come. He is risen from the dead and he is our hope.

It is always necessary to proclaim the real coming of Christ into this world, in a specific time and place, from Bethlehem to the Cross. For the skeptics always emerge at Christmas to tell us that Jesus’ birth is only a myth and that he never existed. Or they tell us that even if there was a Jesus of Nazareth, his later followers conspired to dress him up in a garb of divinity and made him the Son of God. Please don’t fall for this. Their skepticism is not based on good historical evidence - it arises from their recognition that if they admit the Biblical claims about Jesus, then they must acknowledge him as Lord. Those of us who heard Dr. Paul Maier’s lectures last month know that there is abundant evidence outside the Bible, geographical, historical and archaeological to support the Biblical story of Jesus.

Here’s why the proclamation of Christ’s coming among us gives us hope. It not only means that God loves us but loves so much that he came in person to save us from our captivity to sin and death. Our suffering is so important to God that he came in person to suffer with us and even more than us, in order to transform our suffering by his own. If Christ is not the Son of God in the flesh, then God has left us to suffer on our own and to save ourselves. And that is a recipe for despair. We would then have a God who only watches us from a distance, not a God who gets his hands dirty and bloody to help us. But in accord with Scripture we proclaim the real coming of God in Christ. We proclaim that the root of Jesse has come and God raised him from the grave after his cruel death on the Cross. So when you are tempted to despair over the world or yourself, remember that we have a God who has come in person to live with us, to suffer for us and to help us. That’s how much God loves and cares for us.

Secondly, we proclaim the present coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope.

“He who rises” prophesied Isaiah. Christ did rise. He is not a figure of past history, but our living contemporary. We proclaim Christ who comes to us now by the power of the Holy Spirit. We proclaim Christ who comes to be with us as we walk the road of suffering and joy, the road of doubt and faith, the road of darkness and light. We proclaim the Christ who

comes to help, to strengthen, to comfort, to forgive, to reconcile, and to surprise us with God's gifts and God's grace. We proclaim the Christ who comes when we call upon his Name, and even goes before us to prepare the way.

Paul knew about the present coming of Christ for Paul, then Saul, met Christ on the Damascus road in a life-changing encounter. And when Paul writes, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," he is talking about his daily experience of Christ who came and gave him strength to live the Christian life and fulfill his mission.

We proclaim the present, here and now coming of Christ. And that gives us hope for today and everyday. Christ came and made himself real to me one night in a hospital emergency room and I knew that whatever happened I would not be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Christ comes to strengthen us for every challenge including the challenge of living as Christians in today's world. And in the final hour he will come as he has promised and take us to the Father's house. Don't despair over your present challenges and anxieties. Lift up your heart. For Christ knows and cares and comes to help. He has come to meet us today and draws near as we receive this sacrament by faith. We proclaim the present coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope.

And then we proclaim the future coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope.

The New Testament is alive with the promise of Christ's future coming. When Christ returns the dawn of God's Kingdom which began with his first advent will cover and renew all God's creation. "Nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

Christ's second coming also gives us a personal hope. Paul writes to the Philippians, "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." Christ is coming again to finish what God has started in the world and in our own lives. The when is unknown. But it is certain. Christ will come again and every eye will see him. And if we are trusting him now as Saviour, we need not fear the day of his return. The flood that sweeps us away on that day will be the flood of God's love and grace. Those who finally refuse to acknowledge Christ as God's Son and live under his Lordship will perish in a place separated from God. But God wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. God wants no one to perish. That's why we preach the Gospel and work for God's Kingdom now. It's so that as many souls as possible will know the present and future blessing of belonging to God through Jesus Christ.

In 1964 legendary baseball announcer Harry Caray screamed to St. Louis fans. "I can't

believe it! Roger Craig hit the left-center-field wall. The Cardinals are going to win the pennant!” In fact Caray was right, the Cardinals did win the pennant - but this declaration was made during the fourth game of the season. In what Roger Craig had done, Caray saw a foreshadowing of what lay ahead.

In the first coming of Christ, his life, death, resurrection and ascension, we see a foreshadowing of the coming Kingdom of God. And by our faith in Christ we are going to be part of it. In fact, through faith in Christ we already have a foretaste of Kingdom blessings. We are already on the victory side!

Oh yes, “The Children of Men.” The story takes a sudden turn when a young immigrant woman in England unexpectedly becomes pregnant. Her friends take extraordinary measures to protect her against the authorities who want to kill the child. The powers and principalities know that the hope unleashed by this birth would strip away their power and control. Eventually the child, a little girl, is born in a refugee camp in bare room, and the movie ends with a hint of the hope that will sweep across the world and fills peoples’ hearts when the news of the birth gets out. The last word you see in the movie is not “The End” but “Tomorrow.” There is a new tomorrow because of the birth of one child. Light breaks forth in a dark world. Does that story remind you of another birth story we know?

We proclaim the coming of Christ so that you may abound in hope. We proclaim the Biblical truth of Christ’s first coming, his coming in the present days, and his future coming as Judge and Lord. We proclaim Christ with the prayer that the God of hope may fill you will all joy and hope in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.